

THE IMPLICATIONS OF LITERACY



*Written Language and Models
of Interpretation in the Eleventh
and Twelfth Centuries*

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FOR MY MOTHER

PREFACE

The problems raised by a study which attempts to cross the boundaries of several disciplines are never easy to solve. The strategy employed in the present volume is relatively straightforward. Throughout, an effort has been made to provide accurate working summaries of important historical, philosophical, or theological texts before an analysis is undertaken in relation to the book's central theme. This procedure has been adopted for a number of reasons. It could not be assumed that even among medievalists those who were knowledgeable in one field under investigation were widely read in others. The inaccessibility of certain works under discussion was another factor: the chronicles of the early Pataria are not available in translation, and the treatises on the eucharist present unusual problems of interpretation. As an alternative, quotations could have been made in the originals, and, wherever warranted, this has been done. However, a mass of evidence cited only in Latin would have rendered the book incomprehensible to critical theorists, to social scientists, and to non-medievalists in cultural history, on whose behalf in part it has been written.

As far as I am aware, the central argument of the book is my own, and I alone am responsible for the study's theoretical or practical limitations. Yet I owe a large debt to a number of generous colleagues. Among those who read earlier drafts of various chapters, I especially thank J. N. Hillgarth, B. W. Merrilees, Walter H. Principe, A. G. Rigg, and Professor Raoul Manselli. Caroline W. Bynum and John T. Gilchrist read the entire manuscript in an earlier version and made many helpful suggestions. Franz H. Bäuml, Edward Peters, and Heather Phillips kindly read the completed draft, while Maruja Jackman brought to the discussion the sorts of questions which a medievalist might not normally have asked.

To others I owe more general debts: to Gerhart Ladner, for his pioneering studies of the idea of reform; to Georges Duby, for his contributions to eleventh-century *mentalité*; and to Cinzio Violante, whose analysis of the early Patarene movement laid the foundation for all subsequent inquiry. Two good friends, John O'Neill and Natalie

PREFACE

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I should never have embarked on a study of such complexity had I not been sustained by the unusual research environment of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies. I have received much encouragement over the years from J. Ambrose Raftis and Michael M. Sheehan; and I owe a special debt to Leonard Boyle, who graciously read the entire manuscript and gave me the benefit of his learned advice on paleography, diplomatics, and wider historical concerns. I should also like to thank the librarian, Rev. D. A. Finlay, C.S.B., for granting many special requests.

Finally, I should like to express my appreciation to R. Miriam Brokaw and the editors of the Princeton University Press for the care they have taken in the production of this book.

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THE IMPLICATIONS OF LITERACY

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a study of the rebirth of literacy and of its effects upon the cultural life of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Literacy itself is the subject of Chapter One. The other four chapters treat heresy and reform, the eucharistic controversy, language and theological reality, and ideas and society. No attempt is made to oversimplify the internal development of these historical problems for the sake of setting up a unitary perspective. Yet the choice of topics as well as the manner of presentation are intended to lay the foundation for a broader thesis linking literacy's rise to the emergence of similar modes of thought in different branches of the period's cultural life. These, I argue, may be described as literacy's implications.

The book's principal theoretical tenets may be stated briefly as follows. Before the year 1000—an admittedly arbitrary point in time—there existed both oral and written traditions in medieval culture. But throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries an important transformation began to take place. The written did not simply supersede the oral, although that happened in large measure: a new type of interdependence also arose between the two. In other words, oral discourse effectively began to function within a universe of communications governed by texts. On many occasions actual texts were not present, but people often thought or behaved as if they were. Texts thereby emerged as a reference system both for everyday activities and for giving shape to many larger vehicles of explanation. The effects on higher culture were particularly noticeable. As methods of interpretation were increasingly subjected to systematic scrutiny, the models employed to give meaning to otherwise unrelated disciplines more and more clustered around the concept of written language. Standing, therefore, behind much of the renaissance of intellectual life is a set of assumptions about language, texts, and reality.

The rapprochement between the oral and the written consequently began to play a decisive role in the organization of experience. The results can be seen in sets of dichotomies based upon linguistic considerations which lie beneath the surface of a number of the period's

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key cultural issues. One of these was the relation of human action to the formal written models by which, it was thought, random events could be set in order. A distinction likewise arose between the content of what was perceived and the status in reality assigned to it by the process of sifting, classifying, and encoding. At a more abstract level, philosophers revived the opposition between what was really taking place when events were described in words and what was merely thought or said to be taking place. A barrier was also introduced between traditional accounts of how the universe worked and scientific constructs, which were normally the byproduct of a logically articulated cosmic design. Sets of rules, that is, codes generated from written discourse, were employed not only to produce new behavioural patterns but to restructure existing ones. Literacy thereby intersected the progress of reform. At an individual level, a change was brought about in the means by which one established personal identity, both with respect to the inner self and to external forces. And the writing down of events, the editing so to speak of experience, gave rise to unprecedented parallels between literature and life: for, as texts informed experience, so men and women began to live texts.

In sum, what eventually came about was the simultaneous existence of different provinces of meaning based upon logical and linguistic considerations, each having its own assumptions about how knowledge was communicated. Moreover, it was in the fundamental process of categorization, rather than in the content of knowledge alone, that the Middle Ages broke irrevocably with the interpretive patterns of later antiquity and moved towards those of early modern Europe. There had of course been widespread literacy in the classical world and occasional revivals of latinity in the period before the millennium, the most impressive being associated with the Carolingian reforms of speaking and writing the ancient tongue. Although styles of script and methods of book production were in constant evolution, the eleventh century's major innovations did not take place in the techniques of reading and writing. The novelty arose from the range, depth, and permanence of literacy's influence, which, over the course of time, was gradually brought to bear on a broader field of activity than ever before, and from the altered status of oral discourse in relation to real or putative texts. In fact, one of the demonstrable signs of a changed environment was the ambivalence with which many textual models were greeted by the medievals themselves.

The study of the cultural context of the spoken word is of course not new. In fact, it is widely recognized by historians, students of

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literature, and social scientists that the appearance of literacy in a society formerly dependent on oral communication can contribute to the way in which individuals perceive issues, frame them in language, and evolve systems of interpretation. But the process by which this takes place is as yet poorly understood, both within earlier phases of western civilization and in contemporary communities which until recently had only a slight acquaintance with the written word. At first, historians focused on proving the existence of literacy during the Middle Ages, on establishing its alleged connections with economic development, and on tabulating as best they could the numbers of readers and writers. However, it has become clear that, in a society, whether past or present, in which the researcher's assumptions about the centrality of the written word in culture are not shared, mere statistics can be misleading, especially if taken out of their social context. During the medieval period the implanting of a society that acknowledged literate criteria in a wide variety of circumstances required more than a simple increase in the use of scribal techniques. A different style of reflection also had to question long-established habits of thought, which, if not actually produced by oral tradition, were nonetheless maintained in the system of human interchange by means of the spoken word.

The attempt to impose such a broad, if flexible, framework of analysis on a number of separate medieval cultural activities has some obvious limitations. Since the early nineteenth century, when the study of the Middle Ages first entered the secular university curriculum, the field has been confounded from time to time by large hypotheses, which only accounted for one aspect of development by neglecting others. One has only to recall the various stage theories, the reduction of culture to an epiphenomenon of material change, or the still popular notion of periodic renaissances. The present volume offers no palliatives for those in search of oversimplified pictures of historical growth, still less for those seeking to illustrate contemporary theories in the social sciences through the anecdotal use of medieval data. However, it does propose three perspectives on a seminal century and a half, which, in the author's view at least, has too long suffered from the complementary deficiencies of overspecialization and undergeneralization. The first is the replacement of much linear, evolutionary thinking with a contextualist approach, which describes phases of an integrated cultural transformation happening at the same time. For "humanity," C. S. Lewis observed, "does not pass through phases as a train passes through stations: being alive, it has the privilege of

always moving yet never leaving anything behind."¹ The second is the reaffirmation of a theory of the middle range,² which is better suited to the present, imperfect state of thinking in the cultural sciences than universal tenets. Finally, the book attempts to place the problem of language and culture at the centre of the discussion. For, without such a shift in emphasis away from purely factual and historical description, little progress in understanding beyond the comparison of content is possible.

The adoption of these perspectives, it goes without saying, requires the employment of literary and historical styles of analysis at once. Also involved are the use and reuse of three concepts, namely literacy, textuality, and orality, which merit clarification at the outset.

Of the three, literacy is the most difficult to define and the most troublesome to use. The term's connotative field in English has no precise equivalent in other languages. Worse, no matter how literacy is characterized, there is, even within English, no universally agreed, value-free definition. The conceptual vocabulary evolved for debating the issues everywhere betrays an ineradicable bias towards written tradition.

Little light is shed on the question by referring back to medieval precedents, since, throughout the period, *litteratus*, the word most closely corresponding to "literate," indicated a familiarity, if not always a deep understanding, of Latin grammar and syntax.³ There was also vernacular literacy, or rather literacies, although their early record is fragmentary when compared to Latin. The literate, in short, was defined as someone who could read and write a language for which in theory at least there was a set of articulated rules, applicable to a written, and, by implication, to a spoken language. Even today, such terms as "preliterate" and "illiterate," which are commonly used to describe earlier phases of culture, imply a semantic norm linked to the use of texts. The study of past or present communities less dependent on writing than our own has provided correctives to one-sided views. Yet, inescapably, we are better equipped intellectually to outline the role of literacy among people like ourselves, or among those presumably desirous of becoming so, than in societies functioning all or partly by word of mouth. Of course, tracing the roots of

¹ *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford, 1936), I.

² R. K. Merton, "On Sociological Theories of the Middle Range," in *On Theoretical Sociology. Five Essays, Old and New* (New York, 1967), 39-40.

³ H. Grundmann, "Litteratus-illiteratus. Der Wandel einer Bildungsnorm vom Altertum zum Mittelalter," *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 40 (1958), 1-15; discussed below, Ch. 1, pp. 14ff.

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modern literacy is a valid dimension of the subject. But it is no substitute for reconstituting another society's system of communication on its own terms.

The imprecision of the idea of literacy, as well as the uneven state of the documentation, make it preferable in a medieval context to speak of the occasioned uses of texts. Distinguishing between literacy and textuality can also help to isolate what was original in the medieval achievement.

Literacy is not textuality. One can be literate without the overt use of texts, and one can use texts extensively without evidencing genuine literacy. In fact, the assumptions shared by those who can read and write often render the actual presence of a text superfluous. And, if common agreement obviates the need for texts, disagreement or misunderstanding can make them indispensable. Texts, so utilized, may be symptomatic of the need for explanation and interpretation, even at times of functional illiteracy.

If ancient, medieval, and early modern society shared a similar bias towards a literate official culture, the high Middle Ages differed from periods before and after it in the complexity of its attitudes towards texts. In the classical world, as nowadays, one assumes a widespread recognition of literate norms in education and society, even if in practice genuine literacy is not universal. But, down to the thirteenth century, written traditions were largely islands of higher culture in an environment that was not so much illiterate as nonliterate. As a consequence, texts served a broader range of purposes than they do in a society in which literacy is the axis of educational theory and practice. On many occasions, texts merely recorded oral transactions, telling us little of the cultural level of the participants other than that they employed the services of a scribe. On others, they functioned as evidential documents, that is, as a sort of insurance policy in case the oral record was forgotten or obliterated. On still others, they served what diplomatics calls a dispositive role, which effectively superseded oral arrangements, even though the signatories to a document may have pledged their faith by verbal, formal, and gestural means. To investigate medieval literacy is accordingly to inquire into the uses of texts, not only into the allegedly oral or written elements in the works themselves, but, more importantly, to inquire into the audiences for which they were intended and the mentality in which they were received.

The status of texts, then, is one side of the problem of medieval literacy. The other is the status of oral discourse, or, more precisely,

the manner in which its functions changed under the influence of the written word.

Medieval orality has given rise to much scholarly controversy. As the term is employed in what follows, it refers to one of two states of affairs. Very occasionally, mention is made of what may be called pure orality, that is, verbal discourse uninfluenced by the written mode. Medieval documentation provides little direct evidence for such orality, although one catches glimpses of it in accounts of gestures, rituals, and feudal ceremonial. These activities are presumed to take place in a world that is preliterate: in theory at least, they arise not from an ignorance but from an absence of texts.

The type of orality for which the Middle Ages furnishes the most abundant evidence is verbal discourse which exists in interdependence with texts, as, for instance, do the normal spoken and recorded forms of a language, which impinge upon each other in complex ways but remain mutually exclusive. The medievals did not understand, as indeed we do not, how spoken and written styles of interchange influence each other. However, from about the millennium, the written word, if directly affecting only a minority, had once again begun to be widely adopted as a basis for discussions of cultural activity and even as a standard of cultural progress. Inevitably, there was a certain amount of tension: for, in this "traditional" society, in which the new was almost always framed in terms of the old, the rules of the game were radically altered when the sole means of establishing a position's legitimacy was assumed to be the discovery of a written precedent.

There were of course both negative and positive consequences. On the negative side, a different set of value judgments emerged. The preliterate, who managed without texts, was redefined as an illiterate, that is, as a person who did not understand the grammar and syntax of a written language.⁴ Literacy thereby became a factor in social mobility: the lower orders could neither read nor write, but their lives were increasingly influenced by those who could. On the positive side, the revival of writing added a new dimension to cultural life, very often, as noted, incorporating the oral into a real or implied textual framework. An example is the role of spoken testimony within codified statutes, which transcended the oral legal formalism of the early Middle Ages and gradually evolved within literate jurisprudence.

This second type of orality, it should be stressed, is an essential

⁴ Cf. F. H. Bäuml, "Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy," *Speculum* 55 (1980), 237-43, 246-49, discussed below, Ch. 1, pp. 19ff.